A Single Decision (Take Two)

By: Timewatch (/u/1698214/Timewatch) (https://www.fanfiction.net/pm2/post.php?uid=1698214)

Follow/Fav

Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]

Rated: Fiction T (https://www.fictionratings.com/) - English - Sci-Fi/Friendship - General Grievous, OC - Chapters: 53 - Words: 542,002 - Reviews: 1,397 (/r/11714223/) - Favs: 1,321 - Follows: 1,431 - Updated: Aug 19, 2022 - Published: Jan 4, 2016 - id: 11714223

Chapter 34

Tarkin had only been Supreme Chancellor of the Galactic Republic for a little over a day, but during that day, he liked to think he'd done more than Amedda had in six months. He'd scandalized the Kuatis by postponing every single one of the thousands of new *Imperator*-class Star Destroyers that had yet to be laid down, he'd caused Corellian Engineering Corporation stocks to soar by placing an order for thirty-thousand *Consular*-class escort ships. The market was about to get another surprise as he placed an order for fifteen-thousand light corvettes from Rendili StarDrive. The Kuatis had seethed at the idea of being forced to build some of these vessels under license, but Tarkin needed their industries to save what was left of the Republic's logistical capabilities. They had conceded when he'd told them just what he was planning to do when the situation stabilized.

The Ultimate Weapon, Tarkin thought, gazing at the hologram blueprints for the spherical battle station. One hundred and sixty kilometers in diameter, nearly five hundred and nine quintillion tons in projected mass, provisions to carry an army that could conquer an entire star system by itself, and a hypermatter reactor big enough to power a superlaser of unheard-of destructive power. *A weapon with only one purpose,* he thought, *to rule the Galaxy through fear... Oh, Sheev, your delusions of grandeur were beautiful to behold. You departed from this galaxy too soon, but not to fear, I'll see to it your vision is complete.*

But to justify the expenditure of money and materials that could replace the losses at Kashyyyk many times over, that would be the problem. Besides the lack of a working superlaser system, of course. Republic Intelligence had searched the Galaxy far and wide for any sign the Separatists were building such a weapon as well; the designs had come from Geonosis, after all. After three and a half years, they'd found nothing. The possibility remained, however slim, that somehow they'd missed the massive flow of materials required to build such a station, but Tarkin doubted it. In all truth, there likely was no Separatist Ultimate Weapon hiding half-built in some dark corner of the universe. If the Republic hadn't managed to get the proposed superlaser working, then there was no way the Separatists rebels had.

Of course, no one outside of Republic Intelligence and the highest echelons of the government knew this. The secret committee overseeing the construction of the project woke up at night in cold sweats, haunted by nightmares of the phantom Separatist battlestation appearing above Coruscant one day. They didn't need to know it probably didn't exist. So until further notice, construction would inch along, piece by piece, month by month. As of now, the completion date was estimated to be just under eighteen years in the future. But that could easily change with more funding, supply, and manpower.

As much as Tarkin would have loved to contemplate superweapon projects and production schedules, less interesting events demanded his attention.

"Zeltros?" Tarkin asked, closing the Ultimate Weapon's blueprints.

"Yes, my lord," said Director Orlok of Republic Intelligence. "Jedi General Kenobi is there right now, I've got some information that I would like the both of you to hear."

"Very well," said Tarkin. In moments, they'd hooked in Kenobi to the conversation from his star destroyer in orbit of the planet.

"Chancellor, Director," Kenobi said, with a yawn, "what can I do for you? My apologies, it's very early here. And I wasn't aware my mission warranted such... important attention."

"I'm afraid it may," said Orlok. "Republic Intelligence is a service that must sometimes get its hands dirty and deal with the scum of the underworld. One such undesirable we deal with is Marko Riberre. A Nautolan spice runner, a middleman between us and the Hutts. He has proven very useful to our operations to disrupt production behind Separatist lines."

"What kind of disruption do you mean, Director?" Kenobi stroked his beard.

"Spice, narcotics, and more," Orlok said. "We give him money, he buys from the Hutts, and ships it to planets like Jabiim, Metalorn, Minntooine, and Caramm, vital industrial worlds for the Confed-" he caught himself as Tarkin raised an eyebrow. "I mean, vital industrial worlds for the Separatists. Conditions are not good on many of these planets, they work long hours for little reward. Grievous and his *Office of Safety and Information* gutted our spy rings, so we've resorted to this. It *is* working. Every hour not worked is one less hour of production the enemy has."

"A completely valid stratagem in a time of conflict," said Tarkin. "Do you have any objections to our means, General Kenobi?"

"Many," said Kenobi. "But this is not the place or the time."

A Jedi with a sense of prudence, Tarkin thought. *How acceptable.*

"We discovered the Jabiimi are making a move on Riberre. They want him out. Last night on Zeltros, Riberre got information that confirmed this. The Jabiimi agents are likely on the planet already," Orlok said.

"Does this have anything to do with me?" asked Kenobi.

"Not directly. Two individuals have recently come onto our payroll. Ahsoka Tano and Asajj Ventress. They're in charge of Riberre's security."

"I can't imagine Ahsoka is very pleased to be watching over such a villain," said the Jedi general. Tarkin tried not to roll his eyes. He remembered Tano well, they'd disagreed on nearly everything. It was a shame her master had been killed, Skywalker had been the most bearable of all the Jedi.

"Asajj Ventress, wasn't she the rebel war criminal?" asked Tarkin. "One of Dooku's assassins?"

"Yes, but she was pardoned," said Kenobi. "Ventress isn't the most noble or honorable of characters, I'll give you that, but I think she's done with that past life. We can trust her to do the job she's paid for."

"If you say so," said Tarkin. "This is all very interesting, Director, but now I must ask what this all has to do with *me*?"

"My sources in the Zeltron senate indicate the monarchs of the planet are... shaken, in their faith in the Republic," Orlok said, looking away and grimacing. "Things could get messy real fast for everyone involved."

"Aliens? Committing treason? I'm shocked, Director," Tarkin said.

"They haven't done anything," Kenobi said, with a frown. "In fact, the king and queen very much wish to remain a part of the Republic. They are in doubt of our ability to protect them, though."

"As well they should be," said Tarkin. "I am a great admirer of Sheev Palpatine, and I do not mean to dismiss his legacy, quite on the contrary. But he had a particular obsession with very large warships of little versatility. We wouldn't be in this situation if he hadn't stopped production of escorts and corvettes after the Outer Rim Sieges began."

"All true," said Orlok. "The fact of the matter is, we *cannot* defend Zeltros. We won't be able to for at least two months. That's a long time to hold out against Grievous."

"But perhaps a smaller show of force might inspire confidence in us for the future," said Tarkin.

"*Exactly* where I was going, my lord!" Orlok said, a twinkle in his eyes. "General Kenobi, I want you to put Marko Riberre under Republic protection. Let the Zeltron government know the Separatists are trying to kill an influential local businessman. Foil their assassins. We cannot defend the entire planet today, but we can protect their people in other ways, and put Separatist treachery on display for all to see."

It's not the most sound plan, Tarkin thought, *but we have little choice here.* "I'll approve of it," said Tarkin.

"I'll speak to the king and queen," said Kenobi. "I was heading down to see them this morning anyway, I'll bring it up later." For a few moments, Kenobi opened his mouth and made to speak further, but he shook his head.

"Do you have something else to say, General?" asked Orlok.

"No, it's nothing," said Kenobi. A sheepish, yet sly, look came over him. "I just don't want to see what the Zeltron pheromones are doing to Ventress, that's all."

This time, Tarkin really did roll his eyes.

Today, Obi-wan took one of *Vigilance*'s shuttles directly to the Ibisa palace. It was seven in the morning, the heat of the previous day had finally radiated off just before dawn, and the new day's heat had yet to be absorbed by the planet surface. For once, Ibisa was at a temperature approaching something less than sweltering, if only for a short while.

The Zeltron monarchs were hosting them in a small sun-lit parlor, instead of the vast and empty throne room. "Welcome back, Master Kenobi," said Queen Oyane. "Please, sit."

"We thought this environment would be more comfortable for discussion," said King Taru.

"Oh, I can negotiate anywhere," Obi-wan said, sitting in one of the padded wicker chairs provided. "I'm used to talking while surrounded by battle droids, you know."

"We know," Queen Oyane said. "This is for your counterpart's ease of mind. Formal settings get her on edge, we concluded."

"Ah, right." Obi-wan had nearly forgotten about Komara. *The moment of truth,* he thought. *Is she really a dark sider like Aspar said? Or was it truly a moment of weakness?*

"Are you nervous, Master Kenobi?" asked King Taru.

"I don't think nervous is the right word," Obi-wan said. "Perhaps, *anticipating* would better describe how I feel? Last time I saw this girl, I wasn't in a very sound state of mind. I don't know how she'll react to me."

"There's only one way to find out, then," said the king, smiling mischievously.

Soon, Komara arrived, her entry announced by the herald, in an appropriately smaller voice for the smaller room. "Lady Esera Komara of the Separatist Alliance," the Zeltron servant said.

And there you are, thought Obi-wan, turning to the double-doored entrance to the parlor. When they'd last met, Komara had been veiled in the shadows of *Invisible Hand*'s darkened corridors, lit only by the rainbow glow of electrostaves and lightsabers. He remembered a thin, gaunt girl, her stance had been timid, her mindset unfocused. Now, he looked upon someone else entirely. In the months since their previous meeting, Komara had clearly hit a growth spurt in areas other than height, and her Raxian-style dress made no attempt to hide that. *I don't think I can consider her a girl, she's all grown up,* thought Obi-wan. And it wasn't just a physical change; Komara held herself with dignity and confidence, and most of all, a focused calm. She was a woman on a mission. When she saw Obi-wan, her only reaction was a slight narrowing of her eyes.

"Thank you for having us back, Oyane and Taru," said Komara. Only then did Obi-wan notice the other man. He was only the second youngest in the room this morning, but there was very little remarkable about him, he had the appearance of a low-grade bank clerk. The herald didn't even bother to announce him, so he must not have been important.

"The pleasure is ours," said the queen. There were only four chairs, so Komara's escort–an aide, or adjutant, perhaps–stood silently at a wall, hands behind his back. "I do believe you know Master Obi-wan Kenobi?"

"Yes," said Komara, giving Obi-wan a hard stare, as she no doubt remembered their last meeting. Her right hand twitched on the armrest of the chair, probably the same hand she'd lost to Ahsoka that day. "We've met once or twice."

"I was at her knighting ceremony," Obi-wan said. "If you'd told me a year go that she'd be working for Grievous, I would have called you crazy."

"So would I," Komara said. "Have you told them yet, Ma-" She caught herself before she said *master*, "General Kenobi?"

"Told us what?" asked the king.

"According to the Order's records, I am *officially* a Dark Jedi." The monarchs looked at her in confusion. "A servant of the dark side. An evildoer. Like a Sith, without the formal teachings."

"Oh, I see," said the king.

"Are you?" asked the queen.

"No," Komara said.

"I don't believe she is either, for the record," said Obi-wan. Now everyone was staring at him. "I don't feel a drop of dark side in her. And believe me, I'm *very* familiar with darksiders. I would like to know if she's really gained a noble title, though."

"It's legitimate," Komara said. "Ask the Grand Prince of Raxus Secundus."

"Well, if you both agree Lady Esera is not a Dark Jedi, that's enough for us," the queen said. "Now, let's get about our business."

"On one hand, Zeltros can remain loyal to the Republic, as we have been for over a thousand years," said the king. "And place ourselves utterly in the gravest danger for the near future as we cross General Grievous. Or, we can politely request the Republic cease all military transit to our system, effectively committing treason, and praying an insane cyborg murderer will honor his diplomat's word and come to our aide for the inevitable retribution Chancellor Tarkin will send."

Oyane took over for her king. "Lady Esera, Master Kenobi, you two have put us in a very difficult situation. Please, make your cases for us again, and don't be afraid to tell us why your counterpart is wrong." The queen opened her hands, and the debate was on.

"Please, ladies first," said Obi-wan. Komara gave him a glare.

"No matter what you do, you *are* in a bad position," agreed Komara, turning to the monarchs. "If it were up to me, I would have never been here in the first place. But Grievous wants this done, and I'm who he turns to for a solution that doesn't end in fire. The Confederacy has no issue in how your planet governs itself, as long as you're not dragging others down with you, like the Zygerrians were. Before I dealt with Atai Molec, at least."

"That was you?" asked Obi-wan. "Good work, Anakin hated that wretch."

The young woman did her very best to ignore Obi-wan's remark, but it had disrupted her train of thought, just as he planned. She took a moment to compose herself again. "You can keep everything as it is, you can keep trading with the rest of the Republic. You can even keep your senator on Coruscant. You don't have to do a single thing for the Confederacy, except keep the Republic's military out. That is *all* we ask. And you should do this, because everyone seems to be assuming Tarkin will put the Republic back on track to a quick victory in just a matter of time. But he won't. None of you know Grievous. General Kenobi has fought him, yes, but he doesn't know a thing about him."

"And you think because he's beaten the odds once in his life, he'll do it again?" the queen asked, resting her chin in her hand. "We'll need a better justification than that, I'm afraid."

"Grievous does not beat the odds," Komara said. "He stacks them in his favor until he *cannot* lose. He does not eat, he does not drink, he does not sleep, he does not rest, every waking moment, he is pushing towards victory."

"I've beaten him before," said Obi-wan. "A raving madman does not make for the best commander, you know."

"Dooku's modifications have been reversed," Komara said. "Grievous's mind is his own again. If I'd met him before whatever happened above Coruscant, I would not be here now."

Now Obi-wan raised an eyebrow, and exchanged a look of curiosity with the Zeltron monarchs. *That* was a tidbit of intelligence completely unknown to the Republic. *This could explain a lot,* thought Obi-wan. *Why he's acting more like Shaak Ti says the Kaleesh act, why he's got Komara in his service, why he's actually acting sensibly... The maniac we've been fighting was Dooku's attack dog. What is this new creature?*

"You mean to tell us that the butcher of Humbarine was not in control of his actions?" Oyane asked, incredulity in her voice.

"That's debatable," said Komara. "And I'm not here to debate that. I'm here to tell you the gibbering monster on Dooku's chain is not who you'll be putting your trust in. I won't say he's honorable, but he *is* pragmatic. Keeping his word is in his best interests."

"Is it?" asked the king.

"Grievous entrusted me to find a diplomatic solution, Taru," Komara told him. "Whatever solution that may be, he will abide by. Or else I wouldn't be here."

"Is that your reasoning as to why we should take your option, Esera?" asked the queen.

"Yes," she said. "The Grievous facing the Republic now is not the same one who faced it before Coruscant. He's more dangerous than ever. But he's also more open-minded than ever. Betting against Grievous is a sure way to lose. You're much better off on his good side than his bad side. And while the Republic *could* attempt to punish you for whatever actions you take to secure your neutrality, Grievous will find a way to foil them."

"Such faith," the king remarked to his queen. "Is this what I sound like when I talk about you?"

"A little," Queen Oyane said, smiling. "But this sounds more like a daughter's trust in her father, than admiration for a lover." Komara's face flushed, and her external calmness shattered. Obi-wan covered his mouth as he tried not to laugh. Even the anonymous young man standing by the wall gave the slightest hint of a smirk.

"Truly, we live in interesting times," said Obi-wan. "Considering that this morning we're enjoying the company of this lady of Raxus, what she says about General Grievous can only be true. The road to victory will not be an easy one, against him."

"But you believe it's inevitable?" asked the king.

"Of course. The Separatists cannot match our production. Even with the setback at Kashyyyk, we will be outproducing them by an order of magnitude. If we were to simply throw our numbers at them until nothing was left, we would inevitably win. That will not happen, though, because the war academies Chancellor Palpatine ordered built three years ago have just produced their first class of graduates," said Obi-wan, thinking of all the new crew members *Vigilance* had gotten over the past few months. "Every day, the Republic grows stronger. Our war machine is in full swing. Resistance will be futile in due time, no matter how crafty Grievous is."

"Yes, that was my opinion as well," King Taru said.

"We stayed up late last night, speaking with our generals," said Queen Oyane. "Grievous does not need to destroy the Republic to win. He merely needs to bring it to terms. How many more Kashyyyks can the Republic stomach before peace looks more appealing than war? Twenty-five million Republic personnel were killed, wounded, or captured at Kashyyyk. Yes, many were just clones, but not all of them were so easily replaced."

"All true, your highness," Obi-wan said. "The primary failure at Kashyyyk was one at the highest levels of leadership. Everyone on the ground saw the defeat coming, but high command pushed for a strong response, regardless of the reality of the situation. Chancellor Tarkin's already begun a construction program to counter the Separatist raiders, whose interdiction of our supply lines went wholly ignored by high command. Kashyyyk will *not* happen again, you have my assurances on that."

"I am pleased to hear that," said the king. "But what can you do if Grievous decides to resolve our situation with force?"

"At this very moment, there is little we can do on a large scale. However, you should be aware of Separatist duplicity," Obi-wan said, glancing at Komara. To her credit, she didn't even flinch. "Your highnesses, were you aware there are Separatist assassins on Zeltros at this very moment?"

"We hadn't the slightest idea," said the queen. The monarchs turned their eyes on the young woman. "Lady Esera, what do you have to say to this accusation?"

"I had no say in the matter," said Komara. "If I hadn't accepted, then said assassin would be likely getting nerve stapled right now."

She's no liar, thought Obi-wan. *Though, what is a nerve staple?* The monarchs didn't seem to know either. "That doesn't sound pleasant," Queen Oyane said. "But I am saddened you have brought such sordid business to Zeltros, and furthermore, failed to tell us..."

"Republic Intelligence is already aware of the situation," said Obi-wan, "and they've hired two agents to stop the assassin."

"Ahsoka Tano and Asajj Ventress," said Komara. She nodded to her adjutant standing at the wall. "Yes, they accosted Lieutenant Voyan here last night. Tano tried to pull a citizen's arrest on him, while he's assigned to a diplomatic mission. I'm not surprised Anakin Skywalker's student would violate the standards of conduct for interstellar diplomacy like that."

Obi-wan would ignore that jab, this time. "Oh, so you've all met, wonderful. The assassin's target is one Marko Riberre," he said. "A local businessman of some influence, I understand?"

"Riberre..." King Taru's brow furled. "Riberre... Oh! The Nautolan! He's the one who built the racetrack."

"Ah, I remember now," said the queen. "He has been known to dabble in less legal matters, as well."

"Like spice and narcotics running," said Komara. "He's made some powerful enemies in the Confederacy."

"Such an unenlightened thing, to order someone's death over mere... recreational substances," sighed Queen Oyane. The man at the wall stirred.

"Do you have something to add to our conversation, Lieutenant Voyan?" asked King Taru, glancing over to the other Human, who was not at all pleased by what he was hearing.

"What you Zeltrons call recreational substances, your highness, are in fact devastating to Human communities," said the man.

"If it's someone's choice to indulge, then it's their choice," said the king. "In the end, these are victimless crimes."

"It's easy to say that when you're not the one stepping over the bodies," Voyan said

King Taru gave the Human a cold look, and turned back to the people who actually mattered. "Regardless of the morality one believes in, it is an affront to Zeltron law for foreign powers to murder individuals under our protection. I'm going to have to request you withdraw your assassins, Lady Esera."

"I'll have to take it up with the Jabiimis," said Komara. "But I doubt they'll do as you wish. Your victimless criminals are ravaging the working class, and they've had enough. I can hardly blame them for going straight to the source."

"On that note, I have a suggestion," Obi-wan said. "I have a ship full of highly-trained and professional clone troopers. If you allow it, I could assign a unit to this Marko Riberre's protection-"

"No," said Queen Oyane, sharply. "I apologize for my curtness but unless Zeltros is under direct Separatist threat, I cannot allow off-world troops on our lands. This is my constitutional obligation."

For a few seconds, Obi-wan was taken aback. Tarkin and Orlok's plan had just been blown out the window by the winds of fate.

"You see, General Kenobi," King Taru said in a conciliatory voice, "Zeltros has been invaded many times. No invasion ever remained cohesive for long, not with our effect on outsiders, but Ibisa and the other resort-cities are just the surface we present to aliens. Things are different, the further you get from the areas we've catered towards aliens. Things are... delicate. And as king and queen of Zeltros, it is our imperative to protect *all* our people. That is exactly why our constitution forbids this, and as upholders of the constitution, we must–graciously and respectfully–reject your offer."

"Well, I thought it was worth suggesting," said Obi-wan. "This is your planet, your wishes will be respected, that is the Republic's way."

"Is it?" asked Komara, an unamused look on her face. "Queen Oyane, King Taru, you'd better watch out, Zeltros could be the next Mandalore."

"Lady Esera is under the impression the Republic's occupation of Mandalore was based on very *convenient* circumstances," said the queen.

"Well, Maul did bait us into invading," said Obi-wan. "Ahsoka says he wanted Anakin and I in the same location so he could kill us. I sliced him in half some thirteen years ago, you see, he's never forgiven it. Not to worry though, she shipped him off to Coruscant in a box even *he* couldn't escape."

"I see," said the king. "Well, Maul is in your custody and there's a new government forming, so when will the Republic be leaving Mandalore?"

Obi-wan thought, trying to recall any hints he'd heard about an end to the occupation, but nothing came to mind. "I'm not privy to that information, I'm afraid."

"I see," said the queen. "Thank you both for your time. Taru and I will present these arguments to our senate for debate."

Before the Separatists made their exit, Obi-wan intercepted Komara. "Lady Komara- can I call you that? Or do you prefer something more simple?"

"Captain, Lady, or just Komara will do, Kenobi," said Komara, giving him a glare. "What do you want? If you're here to convinced me to return-"

"No, no," Obi-wan said. "I've been trying to figure out *why* you left the Order, and *why* you're now serving our greatest enemy. Since you're right here in front of me, I'd be an idiot not to ask you." They walked out of the parlor and into the palace hall, Voyan trailing behind, silent as a specter.

"I've told you everything you needed to know on the *Invisible Hand*," Komara said, her voice cold. "Whatever Aspar told you is a half-truth at best, an outright lie at worst. You should really look into him, by the way. I think he's hiding a lot more from you than even I know."

"I'll bear that in mind, with consideration, you're now an enemy of the state and have every reason to lie to me, of course," Obi-wan said. "And Grievous?"

"He's honest," Komara said. "He knows what he is. You all still pretend you're anything but the thugs of a corrupt and failed democracy."

"Your words wound me, Lady Komara," said Obi-wan, putting a hand over his heart. "Are the politicians on Raxus really so much better than on Coruscant?"

"Not particularly. But at least they have enough integrity to reject the intolerable status quo you fight for."

"Yes, I'm sure corporate debt-slavery and all-powerful banking cartels are far superior to some senators taking a few bribes," Obi-wan said. The young woman rankled.

"Need I remind you that it was Palpatine who deregulated the banks?" she asked, before groaning. "Why am I even talking to you? You're too set in your ways to ever listen to anything I say."

"I *am* getting old, my dear," Obi-wan told her. "You must forgive me, change becomes ever more difficult to stomach for me. But I do have one more serious question, not political in nature."

"Fine," sighed Komara. "What?"

"Grievous is a monster," said Obi-wan. "That's all he is now, that's all he ever will be. Do you *honestly* think you're going to change his ways?"

"I already have," Komara said. Letting those words hang in the air, Komara took her leave, her lieutenant following behind.

Obi-wan was left standing in the hall, his conversation with Shaak Ti on the Temple steps playing through once more in his mind.

Invisible Hand was a distinct ship, with her enlarged communications tower and yellow stripes on the forward hull. Surveillance satellites disguised as meteors and flesh and blood spies disguised as spaceport workers or ordinary travelers were sure to notice her arrival anywhere. So, in order to confuse Republic Intelligence, Grievous and his flagship went to Minntooine once more to visit in person, and keep the enemy's eyes off the Ciutric region.

"It's a trick we've played before, isn't it?" Captain Dofine asked him, while they were on the bridge.

"Yes," Grievous said. "They cannot resist following my every movement. Let them speculate, it wastes their resources, however small."

"Very good, sir," Dofine said with a nod. "I've notified the shipyard of your arrival, they should be expecting you."

Grievous had come to check the development of his new warship. His development team reported that they'd finished a mock-up model, and had specifications they were happy with. He wasted no time in exiting his cruiser-carrier and making his way to the research and development part of the orbital shipyard station. With two magnaguards at his back, Grievous barged into the development office, ignoring the wide-eyed Quarren secretary at her desk. She didn't have the nerve to speak to him, but as he passed, she rang up whomever was in charge, reporting the arrival of the General.

By the time Grievous reached the conference room, all the engineers, designers and scientists had gathered, some clearly having arrived only moments before he did, by how out of breath they were. Grievous looked out over the few dozen faces, aliens of every kind, from bland Humans to exotic Xi Charrian. *So that's where the Vulture Droid shape comes from,* thought Grievous, giving the Xi Charrian another glance.

"You know why I'm here," Grievous told his team, as he stood at the front of the table.

"Yes, of course, General," said a Quarren, with an Isolation League armband over his white labcoat. He tapped away at a little control panel inset on the table, the sheen of which was not nearly up to Trade Federation standards that the *Invisible Hand* operated on.

A two-dimensional hologram sprang to life, and the room's lights dimmed. Immediately, Grievous could tell that the Quarren had been the driving force in the exterior design, at least. The ship was composed of graceful curves that would provide a solid guide for the shields. But a monocolor, two-dimensional hologram did not give Grievous a good idea of the ship beyond that general impression.

"General Grievous, we present the Confederacy's newest heavy cruiser. We call her *Oceana*, sir," the Quarren said, looking to the deep blue expanse of Minntooine's global sea below. "Not the most creative name, but we felt obligated, given our daily view."

"A fine name," Grievous said, despite his preference for the more bombastic and threatening. A sigh of relief ran through the room.

"She will be eighteen hundred meters long, two hundred meters longer than the new *Imperators*. Her eight engines will provide three-point-two thousand G's of acceleration, second only to *Cataclym*'s for ships this big. She is only sixty-one percent the estimated mass of the *Imperator* as well, so with her higher power-to-mass ratio, she'll run circles around the enemy. Power is provided by two reactors, a design upscaled from the *Munificent.* Most of her weapons suite is taken from the *Munificent* and *Recusant.* Her hangar–which goes all the way through the main hull–is copied from the *Providence*-class carriers. The bridge is from the *Providence* as well. We believe we can build her with a forty percent parts compatibility with the rest of the fleet, sir. In fact-"

"I want to see the model," Grievous said, interrupting the Quarren.

"Oh, um, of course. You two, bring it in!"

The lights went on again, the hologram disappeared, and a Sullustan and a Sluissi wheeled in a two-meter long mock-up of the ship. "Much better," Grievous said, circling the model. Now he could see this *Oceana*'s real shape. Her bow was beak-like, as if two *Recusant*s had been placed there, one upside down, and in this maw was a trio of massive turbolasers. When viewed down their barrels, they formed the shape of a triangle. "Why three?" Grievous asked.

"Our calculations indicated the rate of fire on one gigantic gun would be too low to be of any use, sir," the Sluissi said. "Three slightly smaller guns will provide a better rate of fire, when one fires, the other two are charging. They're a bit bigger than the double-barreled cannon on the frigates, sir."

"Acceptable reasoning," Grievous said, returning to his observations. On top of the beak was the bridge, just like on *Invisible Hand*. The smooth hull plating on the dorsal and ventral surfaces didn't quite meet in the middle, where a trench with the secondary armament and emergency airlocks was located. There were no windows. This was a ship designed purely for war. Her frontal profile was tiny compared to her side profile, which favored its superior long-range capabilities over the Republic immensely. Grievous looked closer, and realized that the hull plating wasn't actually hull plating, but a shell that masked the true hull. The inner hull was a narrow, spindly thing, to be held together by tensor fields, no doubt. There were a few places where extrusions grew out of the shell, like the fins of a fish. "What are these?"

"Radiator fins, sir, for overflow waste heat," said the Quarren. "This ship's shield and turbolaser capacitors will produce a massive amount of heat in battle, far beyond anything we have now. We thought it prudent to use cheap, tried, and trusted technology wherever possible."

"Good," Grievous said, nodding. Another wave of relief passed through the crowd. Halfway down the ship, the shell flared out, much like on the *Recusant* or *Providence*. Here, nestled in the trench, was the hangar, and on the dorsal surface, two subtle bulges indicating the twin main reactors. The hypermatter fuel tanks were on the ventral side, just like the *Providence,* no doubt. At the back were the eight engines; one at the center, and the other seven clustered around in the semi circle, which was split at the top by a long tail that stuck out far behind the rest of the ship. "Explain this," said Grievous.

"The tail, sir," said the Quarren. "We thought it best to add a secondary sensor suite behind the engines, where the exhaust would not interfere as much with the readings. And..."

"And?"

The Quarren looked sheepish. "Well, it was a matter of patriotic pride, sir. We... We wanted *Oceana* to be longer than the *Imperator*. That's why there's that extension on the upper beak, and this tail. They don't add much mass or material or build time..."

Grievous stared at the development team, who each flinched as his eyes passed over them. "Your loyalty is noted," he finally said, watching the tension evaporate from their faces. "You have planned an interesting ship. But she does not look very sturdy."

"She won't need to be, General. Her shields are even stronger than a *Lucrehulk*'s. Same technology, but built without civilian energy efficiency in mind. In theory, *Oceana* can run her shields off one reactor, and her armament off the other, allowing one hundred percent power to both. The power outputs to all systems will be adjustable to draw however much is needed from whichever reactor," the Quarren said.

"What fuel efficiency are you expecting?" asked Grievous, his mind turning to the logistics of keeping this new cruiser running.

"Not great, not terrible," said a Human. "This is not a peace-time ship, sir, she'll burn through her fuel faster than any of our frigates or destroyers, or even our battleships at their cruising accelerations. But we seem to have a lot less supply line troubles than our Loyalist counterparts."

"For now," Grievous said. "I do not like gambling."

"And that's *exactly* why we've been working on another project, sir," said a Sluissi. "In anticipation of a surge of Loyalist privateering and the strain the *Oceana*s will place on them, we have designed *this.*" The serpent-man presented a handheld projector, which projected a three-dimensional image.

"This is a freighter," Grievous said, giving the Sluissi a flat stare.

"Not just a freighter, sir. We already have license to produce the *Gozanti*-class freighters for our own light logistical needs. They have range, they are cheap, and most of all, they are easily modified." The Sluissi pushed a button on the projector, and the hologram freighter's side panels slid back, to reveal half a dozen laser cannons turrets, a pair of missile launchers, and some curious antennae. "Not only is she armed, but we are of the opinion it's time to exploit our superiority in computer systems. These antennae are a new electronic countermeasure system, designed to confuse target tracking sensors. We can slip these armed freighters into our convoys, they'll be a nasty surprise for any roving ARC-170s and NTB-630s. Not to mention, the pirate Z-95s that have become ubiquitous..."

"Delightfully devious, serpent," Grievous said, giving him a nod. "Start the modifications at once."

"And *Oceana,* sir?" asked the Quarren.

"I am not displeased." With civilians even more than military personnel, Grievous thought it better to keep them on their feet with fear of risking his wrath than to lull them into security and compliance with words of praise. Grievous was, in fact, impressed by what his team had made in such a short time. They didn't need to know that until the job was done. "But" he said, "there are some things I am going to discuss with you before we go any further..."

The proceedings in the Zeltron senate went just about as Esera expected them to. The politicians, the tribal confederation leaders, the ministers and generals, all spent hours using as many words as possible to state why Zeltros must remain with the Republic and stand firm against Separatist aggression. *And it* is *aggression,* Esera thought, unable to deny that hard truth to herself. *We came here with one hand open, and a sword in the other.* But what choice did she have? Isn't this what she'd set out on this path to do? To avoid as many needless deaths as possible? This is exactly what she had wanted to be doing.

While the politicians blathered, morning turned to afternoon, and afternoon turned to dusk. Esera had sat in her suite all day, feeling like a grand joke had been played on her. "All that trouble of talking to them, and in the end nothing I said was even heard," she muttered to herself. Just to get her mind off things, she tried calling Alize.

"Esera, my dear, how are you?" came Alize's voice from the comlink.

"Everything's... okay," said Esera.

"You sound tired. Having lots of fun?"

"Not exactly," Esera said. "I..." *Why am I talking to you? You're a cook, a middle-aged mother free of responsibilities for the first time in decades, just trying to have fun. There's nothing you can do to help me, why did I even try?* "I just wanted to check in, Alize. Make sure you're doing fine."

"Oh, I'm better than fine, isn't that right Yenu?"

"Yes, it is!" said a male voice. "I have no idea who you are, but would you like to join us for a night out, Esera?"

"No, thank you," Esera said, sighing.

"I'm *so* happy you brought me here," Alize said, with a sigh of her own, though happy and not exasperated. "I haven't had this much fun in years! Not since my horrible ex-husband replaced our bed with two separate ones, that's for sure... Just don't tell my kids if we ever make our way back to Zygerria, alright? They're all married now, hardly innocent children anymore, but I don't think they want to know what I've been getting up to-"

"Alize, I don't want to know either," said Esera, covering her face with her hands. "We might be leaving in a day or two, so don't commit to anything, okay?"

"I'll be looking forward to seeing that adorable little face of yours again!"

Adorable!? Esera thought, cutting off the line. *Well, Alize is having a good time, at least. Maybe I'll go bother Voyan.* The engineer had been holed up in his room as well for the day, convinced that Ahsoka Tano was waiting to arrest him outside the hotel. Even if he had been arrested the prior night, Esera would've been down to the police precinct immediately to get him out, one way or another. It was a silly fear.

"Hey, lieutenant," she said, ringing the bell. Voyan appeared not long after.

"Yes, Captain?"

"I'm getting cabin fever up here. Come on, let's go somewhere."

"To *where*?" asked Voyan.

"I don't know! You're the one who used to come here, you know this place. I just need to pass time, okay? And I don't want to pass it with Zeltrons. I've had quite enough of them for one day."

"I'm glad to know that's what I'm good for, Captain."

"You're really not getting out of this now, you would-be holodrama actor," said Esera, "Come on, you've got some explaining to do."

Voyan obeyed, and before long, they were in his speeder, accelerating up the merging ramp to one of Ibisa's many highways. Esera looked out the windows, watching the Ibisa's downtown pass by, a parade of rainbow lights and dark towers stretching high into the rising stars of night. Between the two of them, the little speeder was filled with bad feelings. Esera's mission was failing, and Voyan's mind was stuck someplace else. Some*one* else.

I wish he'd be more open with me, thought Esera, remembering how easily Faera had gotten inside his defenses. But to her–admittedly inexperienced–eyes, Faera had been blurring the lines between professionalism and flirtation, and those were lines Esera did not want blurred at all, even while under the influence of Zeltros's pheromones. *To hell with it,* she thought, *I'll just take the direct approach!*

"So, Voyan, who was she?" Esera asked.

"Who, Captain?"

"Don't play dumb with me. Your mind has been fixed on her ever since last night. You didn't tell me the whole story, about what went down with Ventress and Tano. And let's drop the ranks for a moment."

"Right, I can't hide anything from a mind-reader," Voyan muttered. He sighed, and sank back into the driver's seat, one hand on the tiller, one arm resting on the door. "Her name was Naka," he said. "She's from a part of my life I'd like to forget ever happened... But there she was, with Ventress and Tano last night."

Nine years, that was how long ago Voyan had said he'd last been here. He'd also said his university years were the best of his life, which had started twelve years ago. "Why would you want to forget?" Esera asked. "Better to have loved and lost than to have never loved at all, right?"

Voyan gave her a look, but Esera didn't need to see his face to feel the conflict in him. "Every time I start to think of you as merely my superior officer, you go and say something that reminds me *exactly* of how old you actually are."

"I'd throw something at you, if this speeder wasn't so damn clean," Esera said.

"I wouldn't have called it love. She was more than a friend, yes, but looking back..." Voyan paused, and eyed an Ibisa police cruiser two lanes away, lights and sirens silent. "I don't think it was love. If it had been, she'd have never stabbed me in the back like she did."

"Is this where you get your distrust of everyone from?"

"No, only Zeltrons. I didn't learn to distrust most everyone until a few years into my Trade Federation service. There were a lot of nasty people trying to work their way up the chain of command. Some were very good at hiding how nasty they were, until it was too late."

"Tell me about the Zeltrons, then," Esera said.

"They're a deceitful, cold-hearted people when it comes to anyone who isn't Zeltron. You saw it today with the king and queen." His grip on the steering tiller tightened. "Notice how they put their own kind first, above all else. As they should, that is their prerogative. But did you see what happened, when I told them what *their* community's actions did to *ours*? They ignored it! It doesn't even factor for them. The great lie of Zeltros, Komara, is that the Zeltrons love aliens. No, they don't. They *fetishize* aliens. You're nothing to them but entertainment. You will never belong. You will never be accepted. You will never matter. Ultimately, you're but a curious thing, a fun toy, a bauble to be discarded when it's no longer so new and shiny. Sometimes, you're not even that. You're just a means to an end, you never meant anything for a single moment." He briefly closed his eyes, and exhaled.

For a time, the only sound was the whistle of the turbine behind them, and the sound of the speeders passing by. The police cruiser's lights went on, the sirens blaring into the night as it dashed off down the highway. *This puts some things into perspective,* thought Esera. As she considered his words, she thought back to her experiences with the Zeltrons over the past few days. They'd all been interested in the two of them, physically, until they both declined. None of the Zeltrons had actually tried to get to know them as people. *I think he's right...*

"So, this girl used you as a means to an end, as Zeltrons do, and now you hate her for it?" asked Esera.

"It's deeper than that, Komara," said Voyan. "A lot deeper. I'll tell you about it one day."

"Alright," Esera said. Pushing too far, too fast in that direction would cause more trouble than it was worth, she felt. Esera had the idea to push in a different direction, but Voyan had a surprise:

"How was your visit home? You never spoke about it after you came back."

Now *she* was on the spot. "Uh... it was alright."

"I don't think it was," said Voyan. "Or you'd have been bursting with excitement to tell us all about your long-lost family you met for the first time in fifteen years."

"Don't tell me Mister Murshida's been teaching you how to access the Force," said Esera. But Voyan didn't take the bait, he waited expectantly. "Okay, fine. It didn't go well. I got in a fight with my brother-in-law, scared my sister real bad, and my actual brother told me I'd be better off out here for the time being."

"You're an outsider after all," Voyan remarked.

"Yeah, really," said Esera. It was her turn to sink back into her seat, a gloomy mood settling over her. "It's hard to remember a time when I *wasn't* an outsider looking in. Those few years I had with my master were it."

"What made you an outsider on Stalimur?" asked Voyan. "Your upbringing? Your status? Or... something else?" By the tone of his voice, Esera was sure he knew the answer to his own question.

"I got sent off to war when I was fourteen," said Esera. "Apparently that's not normal where I'm from. And because of this, I'm left with a whole lot of... experiences that no one I know can relate to, and I'm not sure what to make of them."

"Komara, I was in the room when you told your story about that battle you fought in," said Voyan. *Oh, right,* thought Esera, *the day I told them about Tarhassan was the day I noticed this guy existed.* "After eight years in the fleet, I've had some *experiences* too. Though for me, it was seeing what radiation leaks and plasma fires do to people, not artillery shells."

"I guess I can't lie to you either, Voyan," sighed Esera. "Let's just say my family has no idea what I've been through, and even if I told them, they wouldn't have understood. They've just got no basis for understanding. It's not their fault, it's not mine... it's just how it is. We come from two different worlds of experience. It's... lonely. It really is."

"You want to know something? It doesn't get better, Komara. You think you feel alone now? Wait until you're my age." Voyan kept his eyes locked ahead, but in the Force, that dreary resignation of defeat rose up once more. "People like us, the outsiders, we don't get happy endings."

"I don't believe that," Esera said, even though his words struck a chord of worry in her. But an idea came to her, a long shot, but one that might just give her the in she needed with Voyan. "Why don't you tell me about these plasma fires and radiation leaks, sometime?" she asked. "And I'll tell you about all my adventures."

"You're onto something bigger than you might think," said Voyan. "It helps to retell such experiences. Face them, internalize them. And in time, learn to live with them."

"That sounds..." Not fun, or enjoyable, that was for certain. Esera searched for the right word. "That sounds like something I need."

All Voyan did was nod once. They drove for a long while more, in contemplative quiet. Esera wasn't sure how far she'd gotten through to the lieutenant, but she'd wedged that door open a little more, and that was worth it. She needed all her crew at their best, and herself, too. *Maybe telling someone about everything I've seen will help me... My brother seemed to think so, and now my engineer says the same.* After two loops around the Ibisa's encircling highway, Esera asked Voyan to take an off-ramp.

"What for?" asked Voyan.

"I want to see what Zeltron food is like outside of the hotels," she said.

"You've got a one-track mind, Komara," said Voyan.

"It's a big galaxy, *lieutenant*, and I intend taste more of it than ration packs and Nemoidian food. Who knows when we'll be around here next?"

"Hopefully never, *Captain*."

Against the expectations of both Ahsoka Tano and Asajj, the Separatist assassin hadn't made a move during the day. Not even while Marko Riberre and his entourage drove to their meeting with the Hutt representatives, in an unofficial motorcade. The Nautolan had been satisfied with their performance, paid them, and asked them to stay on a few days longer for a bigger paycheck. Tano hadn't been enthused, but she'd agreed to it, if only because it was an easy job. So far.

But tonight, Asajj had her own job for Riberre to complete. He wanted a word with the Separatist man they'd met last night, and Asajj was going to bring him to the Nautolan.

"So, you're a kidnapper too, now?" Tano asked her, as Asajj got ready to leave.

"Is it any different from what you tried to do?" asked Asajj.

"He's an enemy combatant on Republic territory in a time of war," said Tano. "Stopping him *could* have impeded the Separatist effort to take this planet. He'd be in the hands of the authorities, not a criminal like Riberre."

"Ahsoka, Ahsoka," sighed Asajj. "When will you learn? You're not a Jedi anymore."

"I know!" said Tano, his voice sharp and bitter. "I know I'm not. But I'm still a citizen of the Republic. I still believe in the Republic, and in democracy, and decency- yes, things aren't perfect, but that's no reason to turn my back on the Republic too! What kind of person am I if I betray everything I swore to protect because of the actions of some politicians and short-sighted masters on the Council?"

"Loyalist or Separatist, it makes no difference to me," Asajj said. "But take it from me, both systems are equally corrupt, because that's what power does. The sooner you embrace that, the easier life will be."

"Not everyone is such a pessimist as you, you mean old lady," Tano muttered.

"Careful, little girl," said Asajj, shaking her finger. "Or I won't take you with me when it's time for the next job."

She let the threat hang in the air, and went down to the hotel lobby to meet Naka. Before long, their target was moving out, and they followed. The white Druckenwellian speeder cruised down the highway, a hundred meters in front of the black landspeeder Naka drove. Asajj sat beside her in the passenger seat, eyes locked on the target. "Whoever's in there with him, we've met before, I'm sure," Asajj said, keeping her spiritual distance from that other presence in the Force. Neither Naka nor Asajj had got a good look at the passenger. "When and where, I don't know... But we've met."

"Probably another Separatist," said Naka. She'd had a frown on her face all night, and her anxiety spilled out of her like an oil leak in the Force, mixing with her natural pheromones to create a most uncomfortable atmosphere.

"You really don't want this guy to get hurt, do you?" asked Asajj.

"No!" Naka said. "What I did is bad enough. And now Marko wants to *talk* to him. I know exactly how Marko *talks* to people."

"And what did you do, exactly?"

It took a few moments for Naka to answer, the guilt welling up in her again. "I used him to help me. I was in trouble with some guys, guys like Marko. Miha's Trade Federation ties let him go places I couldn't. And Ibisa police don't touch alien visitors."

"Oh, I see what happened," Asajj said. She chuckled. "You are a real piece of work, Naka, tricking a Lirraese into working for the Hutts. That is an almost Sith-like betrayal. I love it! That sounds like something I'd do!"

"I didn't think he'd react that badly-"

"You're also incredibly stupid, if you couldn't see the problem there," said Asajj. She patted Naka's shoulder. "Don't take it personally, I'm just an honest woman. Until I'm not."

"What did you mean by a Sith-like betrayal?" asked the Zeltron girl. Whatever else she was, she had thick skin, at least. As long as the person in question wasn't the Lirraese Separatist they were after.

"Betrayal is the way of the Sith. If you come out on top, you were stronger, and the strongest are the ones who deserve power and life," Asajj said.

"What a horrible way to live," said Naka. "They say you're a Sith."

"I studied under a Sith... once." A deep anger awoke in Asajj's heart, and a deeper pain.

"Then you were betrayed?"

I hate it when I'm not the only one who can sense feelings, thought Asajj, giving the Zeltron a scowl. "Yes, yes I was," she said.

"If betrayal is the Sith way, why did it hurt you so much?" asked Naka.

Asajj had half a mind to snap the girl's neck right there. But she didn't. She held herself together, and faced the pain inside her. "I don't know," she said. "I knew from the start, one day my master would betray me, or I would betray him. And yet, when it came, I wasn't ready. I learned from him, I looked up to him. I tried to excel in everything he required of me... but it wasn't enough. I wasn't good enough for him. Sometimes I still wonder why. What did I do wrong? How could I have been stronger? In the end, *he* made the choice to betray me. It's on him, not me. I try not to second-guess myself because of it."

"But you still think about it," Naka said.

"Yeah, I do."

"I feel bad about what I did to my friend. Do you think your teacher feels bad about what he did to you?"

At that, Asajj snorted. "Sweetie, that man was a Sith lord. He was pure evil. You're not very bright, Naka, but you're definitely not evil. Trust me."

"Thanks..?" Naka answered. "So, if you studied with the Sith... does that make you evil too? I don't want to be rude, I just want to make sure I'm not going to end up with a lasersword through my back when you don't need a ride anymore. And I really advise you don't do that, Marko wouldn't like it and you'd make enemies in every system from here to Nar Shadda if you cross him."

"Don't take credit for what I do, and I won't have to," said Asajj, thinking about the Senate Commando captain she'd killed early in the war. "I'm not a good woman. In fact, I'm an awful woman. But my Sith days are well behind me now. Life is better when you're not hating everything and everyone around you constantly."

"That's good to know," said Naka.

The drive continued on, down the highway, as the stars passed above in the clear night sky. They kept on for a long time, until they'd made a loop around Ibisa, and finally the white speeder turned onto an exit ramp. Naka followed, keeping a few speeders between them. "Looks like they're stopping, we're nowhere near the waterfront districts," Asajj murmured, before shaking the highway hypnosis out of her. "Get ready to make the move when I say so."

"Got it," Naka said.

The white speeder didn't go far. It pulled into a little parking lot of a little building that could be any number of such little buildings in the outer districts of Ibisa. This part of town wasn't nearly as rich or flashy as the waterfront, and there were no aliens around either. In fact, Asajj didn't see anyone at all, besides a few youths chatting under a streetlight. *Well, I suppose some Zeltrons need to do the real jobs around here,* Asajj thought. The quiet and calm night was a far cry from the wild partying going on near the beach, however many kilometers away to east. Almost all the businesses on this street were closed, nestled in the ground floors of apartment towers. The Separatist and his passenger got out of their speeder and went into one such business.

"Who is that?" asked Naka, narrowing her eyes at the Human woman. Something about her seemed familiar, she was sure of that, and Asajj had a good idea why.

"Looks Raxian," she said. "Short hair is a Tionese Human female thing. It used to mean she's unmarried, but now it's just a way to look young. On Raxus, that is."

"I never would've thought Asajj Ventress was a Humanologist," Naka said.

"I'm not. I just listened to my... teacher ramble about Raxian culture too many times. He was amused by how many ancient Sith Empire customs their nobility had preserved, in incredibly corrupted and toothless forms." Asajj smirked. "I bet this girl doesn't even know her rite of passage she did when she turned sixteen was actually a Sith retainer's initiation ceremony. Garbled and confused, but the parallels are obvious..." *Damn you, Dooku, I can hear your voice in my head,* Asajj thought.

"Weird," said Naka.

The Human male came out first, but there was no sign of the female. "It's time," said Asajj, stepping out of the black speeder. She strode over the few dozen meters to the white speeder, and opened the door, swinging it straight up. There he was, Miha Voyan, Separatist at large.

"Of course *you* turn up again," he said, giving her a tired glare. "Let me guess, you're not here to return my datapad, are you?"

"No such luck," said Asajj, grabbing him by the arm and yanking him out. "Stand still and I promise not to bump you on anything."

"What-?" the Human started to ask, but Asajj had a blaster on him. Before he could say another word, the electric zap of the stun ray made him crumple forward, straight into Asajj. She threw him over her shoulder and moved as fast as she could back to Naka's speeder. *This guy's nothing but skin and bones,* she thought with gratitude. A stiff breeze would probably knock him over.

"See? Easy," said Asajj, stuffing the Human into the back of the speeder. Naka looked back, worried sick.

"You didn't hurt him, right?" she asked.

"Not one bit."

"I hope-" Naka's eyes widened. "Head's up, she's onto us!"

Asajj didn't need to know what *she* Naka meant. Her hand went to her lightsaber, and she stood between Naka's speeder and the Separatist woman. Their eyes locked, blue against blue, and Asajj reached out in the Force, only to be swatted away. That's when she realized who this woman was.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't the little lost knight," Asajj said. "Last time I saw you, you were huddling at Grievous's feet. Never thought I'd see you alive again, Komara!"

"Ventress," Komara said, a burning light in her eyes. She'd changed in the months between Kenobi's rescue and now. The girl looked stronger and more confident, her stance was firm and her mind focused. "I don't know what you want with my lieutenant, but you'd better give him back."

"Or what?" asked Asajj. "Ahsoka Tano only cut off your hand, and she's just a failed padawan. Can you imagine what *I'd* do to you?"

"I'm not here to boast or threaten. Give me my lieutenant. We have no quarrel with you," said Komara. Her right hand spasmed, her left hand was held in anticipation of a lightsaber falling out of her sleeve.

"Neither do I," said Asajj. "But my employer wants a word with your friend, and he's paying me good money to make it happen. So, I'll take Miha Voyan here to where I need him to be, he'll answer some questions, if he knows what's good for him, and you can have him back tomorrow. Or, we can fight it out in this parking lot. Personally, I don't really care."

That was a lie. Asajj had no intention of fighting the little lost knight. *I just want to do my job and get paid, I don't have time for this,* she thought, letting her vexation grow into frustration. And from deeper within herself, Asajj felt anger, the anger of envy. Not towards Komara, but towards the Separatist man unconscious in the speeder. Someone in this miserable galaxy cared enough about him to put herself on the line for his sake. Asajj hadn't meant that much to anyone in her entire adult life. In fact, she'd been entirely disposable.

Komara let her lightsaber drop into her waiting hand. "You're not taking my lieutenant," she said, a green blade leaping up from the hilt of her weapon. But before she could do anything else, Asajj reached out with the Force, and squeezed Komara's throat. The girl dropped her lightsaber, and fell to her knees, hands around her neck.

"I really am trying to stay away from the dark side, but you're making that difficult," said Asajj. "I'm just doing my job. Stay out of my way." She held the invisible choking grip on Komara until she slumped over, and then let go. Komara was left gasping on the ground, trying to recover her senses from the edge of unconsciousness. Asajj jumped into Naka's speeder. "Hit it!" she yelled.

"Hitting it!" said Naka, slamming her foot onto the throttle pedal.

And the speeder shot off into the night.

Even as she saw stars and her head span, Esera stumbled towards Voyan's speeders. *Ventress!* she thought, incensed that the formerly-bald witch had stolen her chief engineer. Voyan had left the key in the speeder's ignition, she turned it and the turbine screamed to life behind her. Already, Voyan and Ventress's presences in the Force were fading as they hit the highway.

"Come on, come on," she groaned, trying to figure out how exactly the Druckenwellian machine worked. After seconds that passed like hours, Esera got the speeder moving, and she raced off for the nearest highway entrance. The black speeder was far ahead, but she was gaining ground. *That youthful need for speed is coming in handy,* Esera thought, as the little speeder rocketed up to her prey.

Then the highway turned. At normal driving speed, it was a gentle, gradual curve, guiding the speeders smoothly along. At Esera's current speed, rapidly approaching three hundred kilometers an hour, the curve might as well have been a right angle. *The airbrakes!* Esera remembered.

She put her hand on the twin levels, and slid the left one down. The speeder pulled hard to the left, and she slingshotted through the curve with only centimeters to spare from the highway wall. "That was too close," Esera muttered, and she closed the airbrake and went full throttle once more. The little Druckenwellian speeder was a monster. The turbine's scream became a howl, and every other vehicle on the highway seemed to pass by her as if it were standing still, their lights flashed by in streaks. In ten seconds, Esera was only meters away from the black speeder. *Now, what next-*

Before she could even finish her thought, though, the airbrakes on the other speeder opened, and it gracefully drifted away. Esera tried to follow it into the oncoming curve, but she was *too* quick on her own airbrakes. The speeder pulled hard to the right, so hard that the nose stopped pointing where she wanted to go, and then the speeder was spinning. The world whirled around her, Esera let the throttle close and extended both airbakes to their full extent. Another eternity passed, and then she was left sitting on the highway.

"Great," said Esera, gently guiding the machine to point the right direction. The black speeder was long gone, the presences inside it faded until they were as indistinct as the rest of the people in the city. At the speed they'd been going, they could have been anywhere. She set off back to the waterfront. *Well, my mission's failed, Voyan's been kidnapped, and I'm driving myself in Ibisa traffic... but at least it's night and there's hardly anyone out.*

It was a very thin silver lining on a very dark cloud.

Esera activated her comlink. "Mister Murshida," she said.

"Yes, Captain?" the Skakoan's deep, machine-filtered voice answered.

"We've got a problem. A big problem. Get me in touch with Xiss, and prepare the ship's security droids for a landing action. I want you and them down here by sunrise, local time."

"What's happened?" Murshida asked. "I can't imagine we're invading the planet with a single ship's compliment."

"No. I've lost Lieutenant Voyan, and he's got two... former Jedi holding him captive. Both of whom can beat me in a fight. I'm going to need all the firepower I can get."

"Ah, a rescue mission," said Murshida. "I'll activate the droids and be with you in a few hours."

"See to it," Esera said. She cut the transmission, and let out a long breath. Asajj Ventress had stolen her engineer on behalf of a druglord. That was a scenario of which no good could come. She was angry that she'd let her guard down for one moment and gotten a disaster for it. But more than that, she was afraid. For all his faults, Voyan was someone she didn't want to lose. *Couldn't* lose, in fact, *Encounter* would be scrap metal without him. *Hang in there, Voyan, we'll get you out, just you see!*

"I'm afraid to report that my mission is only a partial success," Kenobi's hologram said to Tarkin and Director Orlok of Republic Intelligence. Orlok stroked his bushy mustache, and frowned.

"I thought you were an expert negotiator," he said.

"Where I have room, I like to think I am," Kenobi said. "But the Zeltron constitution is quite explicit in this matter. Foreign troops are not allowed on the surface."

Tarkin gave the Jedi his best exasperated glare. "If the Zeltrons won't allow it, then we simply ignore them," he said, not keeping the annoyance out of his voice. "General Kenobi, Riberre is a key asset to Republic Intelligence. Deploy clone forces around his compound."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Chancellor," Kenobi said. His pompous Jedi arrogance had Tarkin's jaw grinding already. "You see, the Zeltron constitution-"

"If you cannot carry out my orders, then you are relieved of command, General," said Tarkin. "Commander Cody, deploy clone forces around Riberre's compound, protect our asset."

"Yes, sir," said the clone commander. Kenobi stood, mouth agape, not believing what had just happened.

"Chancellor, if we go against the Zeltrons, they're not going to stay with the Republic! We'll lose a vital partner-"

"Oh, *please*," said Tarkin, "there's nothing vital about them. Now, commander, since we are violating the Zeltron constitution, I cannot see them remaining friendly to us in the short-term. With that in mind, tell Riberre to get his affairs in order and prepare to evacuate. Defend his compound until he's ready, then get him aboard your star destroyer. We'll let Grievous have this planet, but we'll make him waste time and resources preparing for a battle we won't give him. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"You have your orders, then, commander."

The transmission cut out. Orlok gave Tarkin a nod. "That was the right decision, my lord," he said. Tarkin folded his hands on the table, and glowered at the lingering hologram of Zeltros.

"I know."

Author's essays: Yep, 30,000 words into the arc and the action's only starting. I hope the lack of pew-pew is made up for by Tarkin and Grievous doing grand strategy things while Esera, Obi-wan, and Asajj focus on planetary affairs. I award a tip of my e-fedora to my new beta-reader (Corshy, one of my more avid readers) who took a few hours of his time to scan this chapter for errors. I hope these will be cleaner from now on. Now, I've got three things I want to say.

Firstly, a note on casualties mentioned early in the chapter. Based on some real-world guestimation, I determined a *Venator* should have a crew of about 2357 enlisted and officers (7400+ seems unlikely in galaxy where droids and computers are so capable, you don't need a sanitation department when droids or enlisted crew can do the same thing, looking at you JJ Abrams), give or take a few hundred more for marines, pilots, civilian contractors, etc. Of course, not all the ships present at this battle were *Venator*s, that's why the KIA, WIA, MIA, and POW count is ~25 out of 40 million. Those are number that make the Holocaust look like a joke, but that's the nature of war on a galactic scale. Shout-out to reviewer Ms. Sleepy Clover for bringing up the casualty count issue last year. It took me this long to address it in-story.

Secondly, if you're having trouble imagining the *Oceana,* then go look up the "High-Altitude Entry Transport-221" on wookieepedia and scroll down till you see the CIS ship concept art. Cut off that ugly bow and replace it with a mirrored (along the horizontal axis) a *Recusant* or *Providence* bow, and put the gun(s) between the beaks. I've been pressed for time lately, but sooner or later I'll make a photoshop monster and sneak a link past fanfiction dot net's censors.

Thirdly, thank you anonymous guest for your review concerned the narrative's treatment of Ahsoka Tano. I love in-depth reviews that provide me with actual feedback, negative or positive. I'm a big boy, I can handle some disagreements over the presentation of a character a fanfic. I wish you had an account so we could discuss this in detail but alas, I can only reply to you like so. I will say this: the Ahsoka of TCW show is Filoni's waifu. The Ahsoka of ASD the AU fanfic is a child soldier raised in a cloistered temple who's been at war since she was fourteen years old. One of these characters is stuck in a rut, sheathed in plot armor, and has time travel introduced into the setting just so she doesn't have to die. The other is stuck in a rut, reluctant to let go of the one identity she's ever had, and now has the chance to question the only life she's ever known. So to all Ashoka stans out there, please bear with the narrative. Character development doesn't happen overnight in this story. In fact, nothing does! Ahahahahahah, hahaha, ha ha, ha... ah... Every chapter is one step closer to the end, r-right?

< Prev | 34. Chapter 34: Hot Nights in Ibisa | Next >

Name:

Type your review for this chapter here...

Post Review

Actions | Share | Follow/Favorite

(//x.com/fictionpress)

ray id: php-api